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SUBJECT: THE FPI AFTER SIX YEARS IN POWER

Classified By: Poloff Phaedra Gwyn for reasons 1.4 b&d

¶1. (C) Summary. President Gbagbo,s ruling FPI party is feeling defensive, with little to show after almost six years in power. The party came into office in the flawed 2000 elections with a sweeping agenda of socialist reform. It has achieved few of them while failing to address the fundamental issues at the core of the Ivoirian crisis, including national identity, land ownership, and corruption and economic reform. Instead, it has focused on maintaining power through intimidation and control of state institutions, promoting an ethnocentric, xenophobic ideology. Party leaders have also used dubious legal arguments and feigned differences with President Gbagbo to allow the latter to plead innocence while the former undermine peace agreements Gbagbo has signed. The current political crisis serves as an all-purpose pretext for poor governance and corruption. The FPI remains the leading political force in Cote d'Ivoire by virtue of controlling the Presidency and the legislature but the FPI leadership is well aware that fair and free elections will change that equation,. at least as far as the legislature is concerned. End summary.

¶2. (C) After nearly six years in power, President Gbagbo,s Ivoirian People,s Front (FPI) finds itself on the defensive for primarily two reasons. First, despite coming to power on an ambitious socialist agenda for reform, the FPI has accomplished very little during its time at the helm. FPI stalwarts often try to hide behind the 2002 failed coup and subsequent division of the country as an excuse for their inaction. In fact, however, Gbagbo and his party had almost two full years in which to launch initiatives to begin to address the thorniest issues fueling the current Ivoirian crisis: voter registration, national identity, the concept of Ivoirite, land ownership, and corruption and economic reform. The regime did little on the first four. On the fifth, it did change the structures governing the production and sale of cocoa but this can hardly be termed as &reform8 as the changes did nothing to increase transparency or reduce corruption or the exploitation of cocoa farmers by those in power. The FPI has simply failed to follow any policy agenda beyond seeking to remain in power and continuing to skim money from state coffers. At the same time, it has promoted an ethnocentric and xenophobic ideology.

¶3. (C) The second reason for the FPI,s defensiveness is its own perceived lack of legitimacy as a result of the flawed presidential and parliamentary elections of 2000. The former disqualified Gbagbo,s two principal opposition rivals, former president Henri Bedie of the PDCI party, and RDR leader and former Prime Minister Alassane Ouattara. As a result, voter participation was only a low 37.4 pct. Gbagbo won 59.4 pct of these votes, meaning he received the support of only 22.2 pct of eligible voters, hardly a ringing endorsement. After Ouattara was barred from running for president, the RDR foolishly boycotted the parliamentary

elections, handing the FPI an effective majority in the National Assembly. Since these unusual circumstances are unlikely to be repeated, the FPI leadership is rightly doubtful that it could defeat a united opposition in a free and fair election, thus losing control of the National Assembly.

¶4. (C) As a result of these concerns, the FPI is intent on maintaining control of the electoral process so that it can manipulate it to its advantage. The other lever that the FPI relies on to maintain power is use of militias and street thugs to intimidate the opposition. In fact, since the March 2004 violence against opposition supporters, the opposition has withdrawn and Gbagbo's thugs have been able to assert control over the streets whenever they are called upon to do so. Relying on militias rather than legitimate security forces typifies the FPI's continuing oppositionist mindset. After all those years of opposing Houphouet and then Bedie and Guei, Gbagbo and his cohorts have never made the transition to thinking like a ruling party using the legitimate tools of the state.

¶5. (C) The FPI also finds it useful to maintain a false distinction between the party's views and those of President Gbagbo. Party leaders like to aver that they have been excluded from peace negotiations and that they are not bound by agreements which they did not sign or commit to. First Lady and FPI leader Simone Gbagbo, in particular, is known for her inflammatory statements. For instance she has stated that the emergency decree allowing Ouattara to run for president would have applied only if the election had been held in 2005 and would no longer be valid in the future. Madame Gbagbo was also quoted as saying last month that those who insist on simultaneity of identification (a key rebel demand) with disarmament (a sine qua non for the FPI, at

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least as far as the rebels are concerned) are dreaming. Madame Gbagbo insists that disarmament happen first and she has been critical of the International Working Group.

¶6. (C) This false dichotomy allows President Gbagbo the excuse of insisting that he cannot compel his party to go along with him. It is a tactic that fools no one, particularly since he too has on occasion made similar statements, e.g., when he insisted that disarmament begin before identification. More recently, Gbagbo asserted in a speech to a traditional king and his followers that, as with chiefs and kings, "just anyone can become president."<sup>8</sup> Gbagbo added that Houphouet had named Ouattara prime minister precisely because the latter could never become president just as a chief does not name as his closest advisers those who are eligible to succeed him.

¶7. (C) The FPI also likes to rely on narrow, and highly dubious, legalistic interpretations to advance its positions and attempt to preserve its control over the electoral process and key institutions. In this it is helped by its control over the Supreme Court. For example, the Court, ruled in favor of the FPI in overturning the initial election of the Board of the Independent Electoral Commission before the Ivorian parties finally reached a compromise decision on the Board's composition.

¶8. (C) Given its doubts about its capacity to win a free and fair election, the FPI will continue to try to manipulate the system to stay in power. However, this is becoming more difficult with greater intervention by outside powers and a stronger mandate for Prime Minister Banny. Failing this, calling on the militias or finding ways to postpone the electoral process while trying to assign the blame the rebels or the unarmed opposition, will be the preferred tactics. In a sense, the September 2004 coup attempt and ensuing division of the country has served the FPI well, both in terms of allowing it to exploit nationalist sentiment against the French and as a justification for poor governance and

corruption. In fact, judging from its first two years in office, the FPI would likely have governed just as badly and with as little transparency had there been no coup and the country remained united.

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